National Defense University

National War College

The Irish Problem

Bruce E. Donahue
5601
Fundamentals of Strategic Logic
Seminar J

Professor
Dr. Gebhard L. Schweigler

Seminar Leader
Dr. Terry Deibel

Faculty Advisor
Allen Keiswetter

Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

1. REPORT DATE	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED
2002		**00-00-2002 to 00-00-2002**

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE	5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
The Irish Problem	5b. GRANT NUMBER
	5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
6. AUTHOR(S)	5d. PROJECT NUMBER
	5e. TASK NUMBER
	5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) **National War College,300 5th Avenue,Fort Lesley J. McNair,Washington,DC,20319-6000**	8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)	10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
	11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Approved for public release; distribution unlimited

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT
see report

15. SUBJECT TERMS

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT	b. ABSTRACT	c. THIS PAGE			
unclassified	**unclassified**	**unclassified**		**12**	

The Irish Problem

The fighting in Northern Ireland between the Catholic minority and Protestant majority over the future of Ireland's six most northern counties has gone on since the Irish Free State was founded in the early 1920's -- and from well before that if seen in the context of the struggle for Irish independence from Great Britain. It is an old problem with no easy solution and promises to be a constant in the international arena for the foreseeable future. The situation in Northern Ireland has never been a foreign policy priority for the United States. Particularly during the Cold War, there was no reason to use limited diplomatic resources in resolving a regional dispute when there was virtually no risk that the dispute would threaten any U.S. interests.

This view changed during the Clinton administration. Jack Holland begins his study of the Northern Ireland conflict by noting:

> Even before he became president, the former governor of Arkansas had committed himself to putting the Ulster question on his administration's agenda. Most other presidents before him had preferred to avoid the issue. It was seen as a political quagmire in which the United States should not become stuck.[1]

While still not anywhere near the top of the foreign policy agenda, Northern Ireland did at times get attention at the highest levels of the U.S. government. The United States helped broker the 1998 Good Friday Peace Plan, and President Clinton traveled to Northern Ireland three times during his eight years in office. The leader of the political wing of the IRA Gerry Adams was received at the White House. An office was set up in the State Department to deal solely with Northern Ireland. The United States played a productive diplomatic role while closely coordinating its actions with the UK and Irish governments.

In recent months the Good Friday peace has begun to unravel. However, distancing itself from the Clinton policy, the new Bush administration has backed away, to date declining to engage. President Bush announced that under his administration the United States will

---

[1] Jack Holland, *Hope Against History* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1999), vi.

adopt a "hands-off" approach. He told visiting UK Prime Minister Tony Blair in February that he would "wait and be asked by the prime minister"[2] before he became personally involved. A senior State Department official commented: "The goal in all this is not for the administration to do something. It's for the parties to make the hard choices."[3]

This paper will argue that the Bush administration's policy toward Northern Ireland is short-sighted. The United States has an opportunity to advance its own interests (as well as those of the people of Northern Ireland) by seizing the initiative, especially given the current breakdown in implementation of the Good Friday peace plan.[4] There is no question that any analysis will leave the sectarian violence in Northern Ireland far down on our list of foreign policy priorities, especially in light of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack on the United States. That is not the point. We should decide, based on a strategic review of our national interests, whether the United States should play any role at all and if so, what that role should be. A careful review of the issues presents a compelling case for U.S. engagement.

Continued violence in Northern Ireland does not pose any serious security or economic threats to the Unites States. There is little to no risk of spillover that would affect our friends and allies. In fact, the UK and Ireland, the former in particular, are close to the United States in history, culture and in their strategic view of the world. They are responsible members of the world community. The UK is perhaps our closest ally. In addition, the political violence in Northern Ireland is at a very low level relative to the violence elsewhere in the world. If the United States did nothing to address the situation in Northern Ireland, the world would little notice or care.

But there is more at stake that does affect the U.S. national interest. It is now an almost *a*

---

[2] Alan Sipress, "Bush Retreats from U.S. Role as Peace Broker," *Washington Post*, 17 March 2001, A1, database online at washingtonpost.com.

[3] Sipress, A1.

[4] T.R. Reid, "IRA Rescinds Offer to Give Up Its Arms," *Washington Post*, 14 August 2001, A15.

priori assumption that the U.S. national interest is served by the spread of market capitalism and democracy. But in many cases we have also gone one further step. Americans have come to see themselves as mediators, or to use the diplomatic term, honest brokers. Though a far more complex situation, this is essentially our role in the Middle East peace process. We have likewise played this role in seeking a resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan (within the framework of the OSCE), and in other places around the world. In this sense our national interest is value projection; we want others to resolve differences peacefully, if necessary with an honest broker to mediate between the sides. The still rather academic sounding concept of conflict management has become part of our diplomatic toolbox.

It is important to differentiate between the role of the honest broker in the international arena and the humanitarian. The United States responds to humanitarian crises around the world (to a greater or lesser degree) because it is the morally right thing to do. It is one aspect of value projection. The honest broker, on the other hand, brings moral authority to a negotiation; the two sides must have a minimal level of trust toward the honest broker. What makes the United States a viable honest broker in many (though by no means all) parts of the world is not so much its economic or military power. Rather, the United States has demonstrated sufficiently its fairness and honesty, its moral rectitude if one will, so that other nations trust the United States to be an unbiased voice. In some conflicts one of the parties may believe it gains some leverage with the United States mediating. Of course other nations also know that we have economic and geopolitical interests and that we will pursue them. But in a global system without rules, in the realist's world of raw power, the United States, relatively speaking, is as good as it gets.

How has the United States come in some quarters at least to be trusted where others are not? The Marshall Plan and our post-WW II assistance to Germany and Japan are remembered. Our assistance to these countries was in our national interest in Cold War terms, but was nonetheless generous, particularly in comparison with the policies of the

victors after World War I. Despite our numerous blunders and mistakes (Bay of Pigs, the overthrow of the Iranian government in 1953, etc.), many understand that our motive is not to conquer, but to foster market economies that mirror our own. In many cases we have acted unselfishly in ways that are hard to explain by traditional ways of understanding power relationships among nations. This argument about the U.S. role in the world has been made most cogently by Josef Joffe in his *Foreign Affairs* article entitled "How America Does It."[5] He argues that, "The genius of American diplomacy in the second half of this century was building institutions that would advance American interests by serving others."[6] Further, he states correctly that the United States does not act as a sole superpower would according to traditional geopolitical thinking. The U.S. "irks and domineers, but it does not conquer.... Those who coerce or subjugate others are far more likely to inspire hostile alliances than nations that contain themselves, as it were." [7]

In pure balance of power terms, successful value projection -- to the point where the United States is looked to as a nation to broker peace -- enhances our power as a nation. We gain influence over the players and the process; if successful, we enhance our international image. Finally, collateral benefits in terms of greater exports, for example, could accrue to the United States. It is in this sense that value projection as a national interest works. Besides feeling good, it enhances our power.

Hence, involvement, at least minimally, in furthering the peace in Northern Ireland, would seem to be a foreign policy opportunity that the United States should seize. But opportunities entail risks and the expenditure of resources. How would these affect our calculus?

The risks associated with a strong diplomatic role in helping resolve the situation in

---

[5] Josef Joffe, "How America Does It," *Foreign Affairs,* Vol.76 (September/October 1997), 13-27, as reprinted for use by the National Defense University.

[6] Joffe, 26.

[7] Joffe, 20.

Northern Ireland are minimal. Any policy would first define its limits by close consultation with the UK and Ireland. We would not take steps that would in any way weaken our ties to these countries. We may occasionally annoy them if a bold move on the part of the United States might provide the impetus needed to achieve progress, but the U.S. would not want to go beyond "red lines" that would permanently damage our bilateral relations. Even failure over a long term would entail little risk. The world community knows the intractability of the problems in Northern Ireland and would not consider failure a major loss of prestige for the United States. We would need to be careful not to involve high-level officials (the Secretary of State or president) unless real progress was assured. That said, we are only talking about diplomatic activity; there are no American lives at stake and no risk of costly economic losses. This would seem a win-win situation in terms of risk. This is true with one caveat -- resentment of a U.S. role by those not committed to the peace process could lead to violence or terrorism against the United States.

The risk of terrorism is real, as September 11 has vividly illustrated. The United States increases risk to its own security by involvement in international disputes. Most notably, our involvement in the Middle East is certainly one of the causes of terrorist attacks against the United States. Resentment, perceived favoritism, or merely a wish to strike out against the peace process itself could elicit terrorism against the mediator. The IRA has terrorist elements and has killed innocent civilians in Northern Ireland and England. It is not inconceivable that such terrorists could strike the United States. Unlike in the Middle East, however, the IRA enjoys a base of support in the United States because of the large number of Irish Americans. Further, cultural and religious affinities reduce the likelihood of terrorist attacks by the IRA. Finally, there is no area of foreign involvement that does not contain some element of risk, and for the United States to try to reduce the level of risk in its foreign policy to zero would be to pursue an extreme form of isolationism. This is simply not possible in today's world.

A final element of risk assessment involves the likelihood of success and the relative

importance of the U.S. role. While the likelihood of success may not be high, the U.S. role could be pivotal. In 1998, President Clinton's involvement was deemed "crucial" to the final breakthrough for achieving the Good Friday peace agreement.[8] Though perhaps biased, the U.S. special envoy at the time George Mitchell claimed that there would not have been a peace agreement without Clinton's involvement.[9] Even taking into account a certain degree of hyperbole in these statements, it is clear that the United States can make a difference -- with relatively little risk.

Though there is often a seesaw relationship between risk and resources (greater resources reduce risk and risk is greater when fewer resources are put toward a threat or opportunity), that is not the case here. The resources necessary to play a role (with the opportunity to win big if the United States is seen as a major force behind actual implementation of the peace plan) are inconsequential -- essentially a few plane tickets for a special envoy and presidential involvement if his moral weight could close a deal. This is a small price to pay in light of the possible "prestige" benefits to the U.S., not to mention the lives saved were the violence to cease altogether.

Before proceeding, however, we should closely evaluate the international environment. Too often the United States is seen as a hegemon, the world's policeman, sticking its nose in everyone's business around the world. We are in the Middle East; we bombed Serbia into submission and helped get a new government elected there; we criticize China for its human rights, and defend -- in word if not in deed -- Taiwan, which we acknowledge is a part of one China. The list goes on. How would an activist diplomacy in regard to Northern Ireland be perceived internationally? This question was answered in effect during the Clinton administration. As long as we stay within bounds generally outlined
by the UK and Ireland, our participation in finding a resolution to this "internal" UK conflict is largely welcomed. The parties to the conflict are likewise willing to work with

[8] Holland, 218.

[9] Holland, 218.

the United States. Europeans are not threatened by a U.S. role (as Russia would be if, for example, the United States insisted on playing the honest broker between the Russian government and the Chechens). Moreover, no international organization is currently playing a mediation role so the United States would not be seen as pushing aside a "legitimate" international organization that was already on the ground. There is in this sense a vacuum if the United States does not step forward to be the honest broker. In sum, the United States could safely play an active role without the negative repercussions that often follow from U.S. involvement (no matter how benign) elsewhere in the world.

The domestic political scene in the United States also provides a strong incentive to act. Given the number of Irish Americans, any progress toward a lasting peace (assuming it were not perceived as unfairly biased toward the Protestant majority) would rebound to President Bush's credit and be a large political gain. In fact, the hands off approach the Bush administration has adopted even in light of events in August may cost him politically. Clearly the United States would have to walk a fine line. If it advocated a policy whereby the IRA disarmed but as a result the IRA were disadvantaged in the political arena, it would not play well in the United States. That said, the IRA did agree to disarm under the Good Friday peace agreement. Furthermore, the recent discovery that a splinter group of the IRA may have been training rebels in Columbia will certainly tarnish the IRA's image. It would not be difficult to make the case that the IRA should live up to its agreement. Especially in light of the events of September 11, there can be little sympathy for organizations even tangentially associated with terrorism. It may be that as a result of the terrorist attacks on the United States, we are in the best position to convince Gerry Adams that the time has come to put weapons aside. Such a move now would more likely gain broad support in the United States as it would be difficult under current circumstances for even the most partisan supporter of the IRA to come out in favor of terrorist violence.

If the Bush administration decided to re-engage, it should have very specific objectives. First and foremost, it should seek full implementation of the Good Friday peace agreement. This could best be achieved by urging the IRA to go back to its earlier offer

to "put its weapons completely and verifiably beyond use."[10] If progress is achieved in moving the IRA back to the position it took on disarmament in August, then efforts should be made to get local government up and running again in a meaningful way. These are short-term objectives that are clearly within reach because they essentially represent positions already agreed to. Longer term objectives would include actual disarmament on a reasonable timetable and continued functioning of the local government, even normalization of its role. Last but not least, we should set as a clear goal the absolute rejection of terrorism by the IRA or any of its breakaway groups. As part of our worldwide effort to stamp out terrorism, we must make clear that we will not only not tolerate, but will actively engage with UK and other authorities to combat terrorism. All factions must renounce terrorism as a political tool.

Given the nature of the players in Northern Ireland and the geopolitical landscape, the United States has available two strategies to exercise its power: engagement and interference. More aggressive instruments involving intervention or compellence are inappropriate in dealing with an internal UK conflict. Engagement should in this case be limited largely to classic diplomacy. The United States because of its dominant position in the world, its cultural links to both Ireland and the UK, and its reputation as an honest broker should aim to distance both sides from their extremist elements on the road to compromise. The president should appoint a well-known public figure (perhaps of Irish heritage) whose *gravitas* is well known; he or she would be able to bring moral weight to the table. Small sticks or carrots are available (for example, a presidential meeting to wrap up a deal or public condemnation by the United States of positions not conducive to sincere negotiations). While talk would seem to be a weak instrument of power, it can be effective in the right circumstances. Getting Sinn Fein to reject violence in word and deed is largely a matter of convincing Gerry Adams that his goal can best be achieved through a legitimized political process. Moreover, we must keep perspective in regard to our own foreign policy priorities. We should engage with Northern Ireland, but we should not invest more in terms of costs than is appropriate.

---

[10] Reid, A15.

We might also want to consider covert action, especially in our efforts to combat violence and terrorism. Working with the UK to both infiltrate and influence the Provisional IRA and unionist organizations such as the Ulster Defense Association, the United States could gain much needed intelligence about international terrorism, especially its interconnectivity. Terrorism aside, covert support for moderate elements on either side of the table could also be important in achieving compromise. Our goal should be to isolate and alienate those who are working to undermine the peace process so that those who favor compromise and non-violence will have the upper hand in their respective political organizations.

Accompanying these diplomatic and possibly covert actions, the United States is in a strong position to bring influence to bear, particularly among the Catholic minority. Public diplomacy that underscores non-violence, working through a political process, and ultimately the economic benefits of peace (now so evident in the Republic of Ireland) could be highly effective. Public diplomacy can use all of its tools in Northern Ireland but needs to craft its message carefully so as not to be seen as taking sides. Rather than dealing with issues, U.S. public diplomacy should emphasize process and the rewards of peace. The United States can speak with authority on the issue of religious tolerance, for example, or underscore that the civil rights movement was successful in part because it rejected violence. If used correctly, American influence can affect the process.

President Bush is of course right in saying that the sides in Northern Ireland must ultimately make the "hard decisions."[11] But there is room for a U.S. role. It should be modest, almost unassuming. We should work with the UK and Ireland, yet maintain independence from both in order to use our clout at key moments in a negotiation. Our objectives should be clear: to encourage a non-violent political process within which the United States can serve -- should the sides desire -- as an honest broker. The risks are minimal, all things considered. The United States can enhance its prestige and leadership

[11] Sipress, A1.

role in the world. It should be evident that the United States has no choice but to lead in the world; without the United States a globalized world (in terms of commerce, communication, as well as terrorism) would have a vacuum at the top. The other powers (the EU, China, Russia, Japan) have neither the power, prestige, or trust of a majority of other nations to lead on truly global issues.

President Bush should take the following steps now:

-- using our efforts to combat terrorism worldwide as a hook, send a special envoy to deal with Northern Ireland;

-- make clear to all paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland (including the "Real IRA" which came into existence after the Good Friday peace agreement) that terrorism will no longer be tolerated;

-- offer to serve as an honest broker in the Good Friday peace process with the immediate goal of getting the sides back together and getting the IRA to disarm (we could in this context remind Gerry Adams of his statement of September 1, 1998 when he said that "violence must be a thing of the past -- over, done with"[12]);

-- work with the UK on covert action to stop terrorism originating in Northern Ireland; and

-- make clear also to the UK government that as part of a reenergized U.S. role which will include pressure on the IRA to disarm and to disassociate itself from any violence, the UK will need to bring its influence to bear on the unionists to reach compromise.

Northern Ireland is an opportunity, especially now. Given the IRA's link to terrorism, we can bring power to bear as well as convincing testimonial to the destructiveness of

[12] Holland, 223.

violence in today’s world.